

POSTMORTEM

Getting Over the Hoopla and Under the Art

SUE SPAID

This essay was originally written as a response to two roundtables, one that took place at Cork University, Ireland, during the Spring of 2005, and another held at the Art Institute of Chicago on October 11, 2006. James Elkins, who organized the roundtables, has edited the forthcoming *The State of Art Criticism* (Routledge, 2007), which includes transcribed versions of the roundtables, as well as several writers' responses to the ensuing transcripts.

GETTING OVER IT

One of the many topics that these panelists ruminated upon was the rumor that “rock star” curators wield all the power and critical voices have gone mute. If curators are so powerful, why do exhibitions and collections the world over resemble one another? Couldn't the truly powerful cast their nets wider than some predictable A-list? When did critics ever call the shots? In distinguishing criticism as “what happens matters,” art historian Michael Fried spotted the critic's lot, yet who could spare a lifetime waiting around for one's wagers to hit home? Having new bets to place, we return to the race. Few art world roles carry greater expectations, though none is more misunderstood. A “What do critics do?” panel stacked with peripatetic snoops and sneaks keen to inspect criticism's status is long overdue.

Only critics for major city weeklies like *The Village Voice*, *L.A. Weekly*, or *PW*, or major city dailies in Boston, Chicago, D.C., Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, NYC, Philadelphia, or St. Louis, can expect art lovers to follow their work. If you write art criticism for a magazine, chances are few will value your efforts for years to come. You're probably wondering who would spend hours writing articles for such a small audience? Why do art magazines even exist? Who reads articles later rather than sooner? In addressing these questions, I hope to shed light on criticism's significance: why it can't be taught; why its voice is far-reaching, despite its impotence; and why it's unfair to expect the nation's 169 newspaper reporters covering art to do more than describe it clearly and accurately, while providing

enough background to make exhibitions more inviting for their public.

Let's start with this last point. Being prepared to make judgments about art requires experiencing hundreds of museum and gallery exhibitions annually in dozens of cities, a feat that requires good reasons for spending all of one's time and discretionary income researching art. Unless one experiences a lot of art, it's hard to imagine that one would have a broad enough picture to discern the best from all the rest, so why expect judgments from newspaper critics, whose beat butts up against city limits? When I moved to Cincinnati in 1999, the full-time *Cincinnati Enquirer* art critic bragged that he hadn't visited New York in 20 years, so he was ill prepared to judge whether the Contemporary Art Center exhibitions surpassed those at, say, P.S.1/MoMA.

Those critics who see tons of shows, yet overestimate an artist or artwork's importance—“the year's best painting show,” the “most important emerging artist,” let alone “I know of no other post-war American male artist whose work more completely approaches the condition of poetry, that reads as richly as it looks”—sound just plain supercilious, if not malicious (the last an obvious swipe at Cy Twombly, the poster boy for painterly poetry). Make arguments for the work's

significance, inspire readers to learn more about the artist's oeuvre, but let us draw our own conclusions, thank you very much. And curmudgeonly critics like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik, who bizarrely bemoan the abundance of bad art, yet overlook the good stuff, should just stay away. It's obviously not their forte.

There are several reasons why art criticism need not be academicized. Perhaps a ten-week certificate that introduces burgeoning critics to practicing art writers willing to critique attendees' writing samples (submitted before the program) would prove an invaluable experience. Similarly, one-week refreshers could update journalists working in the hinterlands regarding recent artists on the scene. The best way to teach students how to write about art is to assign them to review fellow students' exhibitions or write essays for student shows. Whenever I request art writing classes to review gallery or museum exhibitions, students submit rather stale papers that tend to parrot press material. Not only does challenging the official story require access to behind-the-scenes information, young writers' peers warrant their attention far more than famous artists. In addition to caring more about their associates, the latter's projects typically dovetail with their own generational interests—a point eluding most academics.



CHRIS BALLANTYNE, UNTITLED, GLORY HOLE (REVERSE), 2006, MIXED MEDIA, ACRYLIC & GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 12 x 16 IN. COURTESY PERES PROJECTS LOS ANGELES.

School can enrich and encourage criticism's crucial tools—values, interests, and a sense of place—but young critics need to read a massive number of catalogue essays, research unfamiliar artists, and experience every show possible. If this needs to be assigned, they're already behind. Even active critics typically devote their energy to artists who stand most to benefit from their efforts or whose works they're so eager to figure out that they're willing to spend time getting under another's work. No matter how you slice it, criticism eats up heaps of time.

GETTING UNDER IT

Since saying thumbs-up or -down seems so Siskel and Ebert, what should critics do instead? Rejecting this plus/minus dualism, panelist Boris Groys proposed the analogue 0/1, as in "ignore/cover." I have in mind something else. Art critics bare witness to what Ludwig Wittgenstein termed (in *Philosophical Investigations*) "the 'dawning' of an aspect." After experiencing as much art as possible, critics select particular exhibitions or oeuvres to analyze in depth. To this end, they study everything about an artist they can get their hands on, so that they can put forth something fresh that justifies—implicit in the article's existence—the work's significance. While James Elkins notes that art historians never reference criticism, a loathsome thought I must accept, reviews written early on in an artist's career or articles offering groundbreaking analysis remain historical markers of who-knew-what-when. Art lovers relish articles penned by critics who spent time getting under the work, articulating what made particular works remarkable for their era.

The view that critics, curators, or the like "discover" artists is absurd. At most, they recognize attributes or features in works that others have overlooked or underestimated. By the time particular artists appear on an art historian's radar, aspects that critics once identified as rare no longer loom disputable. Already absorbed into the prevailing discourse, such critical frames appear so obvious that footnoting seems redundant, even if some critic's perspective, triggered by her particular art experi-



ence, first focused this lens. How does this story's popularity jibe with my view that reviews go unread? Perhaps key readers doggedly spread ideas by word of mouth.

What do I mean by "perspective"? In the course of explaining, justifying, or interpreting works, critics choose, select, frame, emphasize, connect, specify, analyze, and identify those aspects that are relevant for their arguments. Hardly communication tools, as some panelists claim, works of art exemplify acts of discovery, whose outcomes educe physical experiences. Catalysts for novel concepts, works of art unwittingly inspire otherwise unavailable ideas. Criticism thus provides a public record of those related thoughts befalling dalliances with art. Critics must also contend with the motive and context underlying each artist's discovery. To this end, I found the earlier Irish roundtable's juxtaposing of art history as neutral and art criticism as judgmental, leaving art history's criticality a debatable point, quite odd. While I appreciate art history's goal to record stories as accurately as possible, thereby solidifying a work's "static immanence," as one art historian termed it, I was surprised to learn that criticism carried such negative connotations.

One panelist even asked: "What kind of knowledge does art criticism actually involve and produce?" No doubt, singular critics do not produce hard knowledge. The art world, rather, circulates perspectives that either find adherents or disappear. Unlike critics who favor works that require sweat equity, good curators don't limit their selections to personal preference—they display veritable wild cards to goad audience reactions. The art historical practice itself is already premised on questions that are nothing short of judgmental: Why record an artist's history? Why is his oeuvre significant? Why conserve this work? When would be the best moment to premiere it? Which artists did this work influence? Why is this work more "memorable" now than before? It's difficult to imagine questions that critics and curators routinely address as remaining beyond an art historian's purview, especially when the latter is getting ready to publish a monograph.

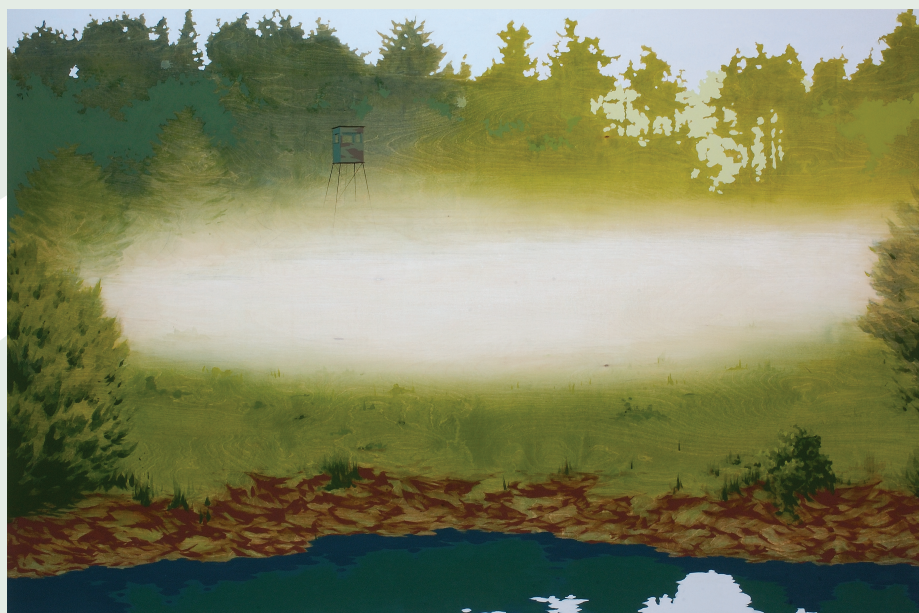
Even if the responses to such questions appear subjective, critics and curators always offer argument and evidence for their positions, so their conclusions are no more or less subjective than those of an art historian who suddenly challenges some prior history. Yes, such judgments are exclusionary, and too often reflect per-

sonal interests or institutional biases, yet our tacit acceptance of an author's assessments effectively legitimizes the objectivity of these claims. Critics, curators, and historians alike must either challenge their peers' premises as flawed, outdated, incomplete, simplistic, and so forth, or uphold their propositions. Revisionist art historians like Ann Gibson, Anna Chave, or Linda Dalrymple Henderson who have demonstrated prior historians' erroneous assumptions cannot be said to be practicing criticism, even when they introduce alternative values or frames, instead of marshaling art historical evidence. The very visibility of works of art, whether this painting or that pot will ever see the light of day, wholly depends on art historians' capacity to judge the merit of particular objects or eras. While the critic might bemoan what's hidden from sight, she is typically stuck with what's currently on deck. That these art historian panelists consistently undermined their judgmental prowess seemed strange indeed.

Let's say that arguments by critics and curators for works are temporarily subjective, but gain objectivity as they withstand the test of time. If art historians don't appear on the scene until the oeuvre has withstood this "test," it's no wonder they fail to footnote earlier efforts. Museums are the worst offenders. Even though everybody knows that a cadre of dealers, critics, and collectors endorsed a particular artist for decades before the museum ever took notice, museums behave as though they alone discovered or made the artist, ignoring everyone who came before. And everybody goes along with this, leaving the museum to select whatever earlier exhibitions and reviews qualify as important enough to be recorded in the artist's official biography. Art historians who credit earlier critics, curators, and dealers are better prepared to navigate the false framing of artist careers by museums. It's disturbing how far the triumvirate of museums, historians, and dealers will go to snuff out the efforts of earlier risk takers, whose labor laid the table for later feasts.

POLYANDRY

How many lovers can you take? And how many can you service simultaneously? Art



criticism tests such skills. What impresses me most is not what I loved at first sight, but what I first detested, but later grew to love wholeheartedly. That is where subjective taste becomes conviction—a surprisingly unshakeable one, I might add. Given the abundance of art that I love and admire, it's often quite difficult to decide where to focus my energies. While I can easily blog thousands of words of description in a day, criticism, like essay writing, persists for days on end, even when completing the 500-word short review. Rather than pull punches, I typically take aim at thematic museum exhibitions, while reserving constructive and fresh analysis for solo exhibitions.

Art criticism entails genuine love affairs. Some last only a few weeks (during the writing process), while others manifest long-term commitments, verging on addictions. I would be embarrassed to say how much time and money I've spent traveling in order to experience some exhibition—why? I can't reply. Certainly not for the writer's fee, which is so puny it's not worth discussing. Rather, hoping to enhance an ongoing relationship (no longer on assignment), I'm pushed to rendezvous with friends or ignite an old flame. Like most flings, I always learn ten times more about a show or oeuvre after I've spent time analyzing it. Freshly released from some intense romance, readers end up on dates with me, absorbing my stories, imagining why I was so enthralled with that lover. Even when

romances are short-lived, I rarely fall out of love. Keen to greet tomorrow, I daren't dwell on past lovers. Only true love occasions groundless judgments.

I have been pleasantly surprised to watch old flames develop and change over time, enabling them to lure new lovers. Viewer interest in, analysis of, or reaction to art works depends heavily on prior personal experience (with other works of art and in life), their knowledge base (art history as well as every other imaginable field), their imagination's capacity to navigate un-chartered territories, their ability to thrive or not during unfamiliar events, and so much more. Love interests border on the ridiculous. I would be shocked to read a review whose writer reacted to, pointed out, or mentioned what I have previously written. My efforts to write a totally unique review or essay for each artist allow criticism to sketch out my amorous future (the memoir's opposite). Such responses are volatile, since they're spontaneously triggered, guided, driven, maneuvered, and inspired by the lover at hand. Perhaps those art historians who consider critics so lecherous (which sounds downright Barthesian) are bound by serial monogamy. Art criticism anticipates the ride of a lifetime.

Philadelphia-based SUE SPAID is adjunct associate professor at Temple University. During the 1990s, the author wrote regularly for the L.A. Weekly, Village Voice, Art in America, arttext, New Art Examiner, Art Papers, and Artweek. The accompanying visuals were selected by the magazine.

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